Fruitvale
Germans

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FRUITVALE

JOHN DENIS

August 2, 1981

Interviewer: Eleanor Swent

Denis

Oakland Neighborhood History Project

Fruitvale Neighborhood
Interview with John Denis, Food Mill
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Q: You were born in Fruitvale district, were you?
A: Yes, right in Fruitvale.
Q: And your parents were German?
A: Yes, they came over here in 1906, right after the earthquake, when their house was damaged. It wasn't their house, a rented house, and so they had to move, and get out of San Francisco, so they came here.
Q: Why did they come here?
A: Well, because San Francisco was pretty much in shambles and--
Q: I mean why did they come here instead of some other place?
A: I don,t know, but it was probably because there were lots of German people in Fruitvale at that time. There was the Altenheim up on the hill there and a lot of Germans all over the area had moved to Fruitvale, so I assume that is why they chose it, and then just because there was something available in Fruitvale.
Q: Do you know what they moved into?
A: Yes, they moved into a house that was just being built, and it was 3025 Galindo Street, and that's the house I was born in, and the house we lived in all through the years until it burned down about 10 years ago. And we rebuilt another house on the same property. And my brother still lives there. So that was our old neighborhood.
Q: What kind of house was it?
A: It was a 5-room house, a brown shingle house at that time, and my dad built one more room on the back, later on, actually a 6-room house.
Q: You said it was being built.
A: The builder's name was Weavon (?) and he built several houses in the neighborhood, and that was one of them, at that time.
Q: Do you have any idea how much they paid for it?
A: I'm not sure, but I think it was around $3,000. Property and everything. I know that they scrambled to pay it off as soon as possible because they didn't have much money and wages then were $2.50 a day.
Q: What was your father's occupation?
A: He was an iron worker most of the time that we were growing up. And he worked on most of the big buildings that were built in San Francisco after the fire, as well as most of the big buildings in Oakland like the City Hall and the Auditorium and several of the other downtown office buildings.
Q: Had he learned his trade in Germany?
A: No, he came over here as a sailor. At that time S,.F. was a booming town, and he liked it, he said it was the best town in the world. (chuckling) He got off the boat and stayed here. At that time

you didn't have immigration laws or anything, if you wanted to stay, you just stayed. So that was it. And my mother came the other way, she came through New York because her sister was there and she gradually worked her way west to San Francisco. And they met in S.F.
Q: Both Germans?
A; Both Germans, yes.
Q: Did you speak German in your home?
A: No, they wanted us to speak American, and they figured, well, as long as we're in this country, we'll be Americans and forget the German. But they spoke German. And had a lot of German friends. But we never learned it, except a few words.
Q: Now, after the earthquake they came over here to live, but your father continued to work in S.F. much of the time?
A: He worked wherever there was a job. It was usually in S. F. because they were building a lot of big buildings there, but he also worked on some bridges, when we were growing up. He built some bridges across the Russian River, and that's where I learned to swim.
Q: You went up there with him?
A; Well. we stayed up there all during the summer in a tent. Because all the other workers did, and we were in the water most of the time, so I learned to swim.
Q: What did you do with your house then?
A: Well, it was just for the summer and of course the house was just empty.
Q: No problems with vandals?
A: At that time we never bothered to lock the doors, and the neighbors neither did. Anybody could walk around any old time or anywhere, and there was no problem at all. I can't remember that we ever locked the back door. Well. because it was the way it was.
Q: That must have been a wonderful summer. Was it more than one summer?
A: No, that was just one of the summers. He was working on the bridge at that time, and that was it.
Q: So your mother cooked in the tent?
A: Well, we cooked on a fire outside the tent. And there were other campers, people working on the bridge were also camping there. And there was one fellow that was a baker and he figured out to bake bread and things in an old oil drum, and made an oven out of it, and baked all kinds of things for us.
Q: How old were you?
A: I was about 14. We had a real wonderful time.
Q: You were born here after the earthquake then. Is your brother older?
A: My brother is older, and he was born here too. He was born shortly after the earthquake and I was born two years later.
Q: Your family didn't consider moving back to San Francisco?
A: No, they were established here and they liked the area and everything else, and we did too.
Q: What church did you go to?
A; Fruitvale Christian Church was the one, but I didn't start going until I was a teenager.
Q: Your family didn't have a strong church connection?
A: Not here, no. My mother went to church in Germany, I think it was a Lutheran church but I'm not sure. But that was it.
Q: So it was not the church that kept them here in Fruitvale?

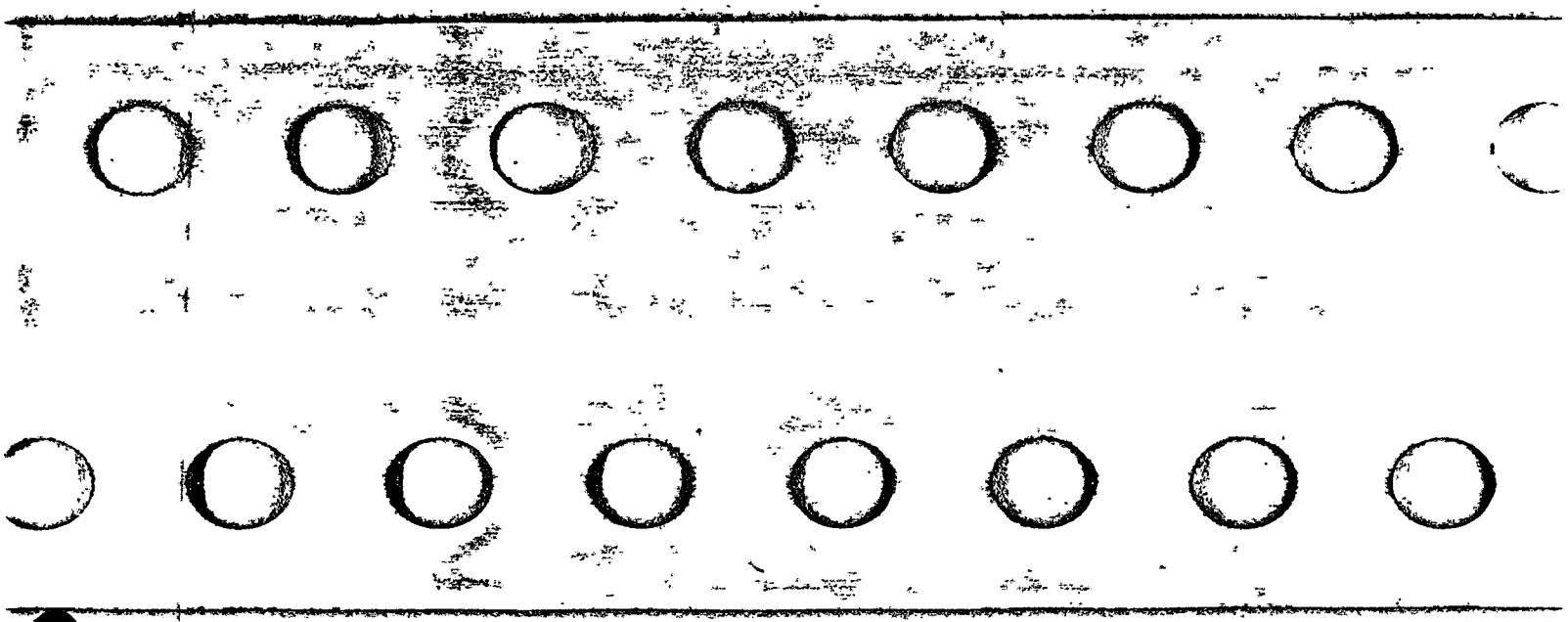
A: NO, not particularly.
Q: Does the Fruitvale Christian Church still exist?
A; Sure, it's there at East 17th St. and Fruitvale Avenue. And at that time it was on East 23rd St. and Fruitvale Av. and the congregation and a few others helped moved the whole church down there one weekend. We took the church apart, piece by piece, and moved it down to the new location, and set it up and it was quite an occasion.
Q: Were the members of this congregation primarily Germans?
A: No. They were just all kinds of residents around Fruitvale. See, I went to Hawthorne school and some of them were actually people I knew in school and other people living around.
Q: Where did you start to school?
A: Hawthorne. I went there through the 8th grade and shortly after I got out of there, it burned down. That was the old building on Fruitvale Avenue and Farnham Street [?] I think it is.
Q; What kind of building was it?
A: It was a wooden frame building with the auditorium on the top floor and then there were I think three floors all together. It burned down and then they built the new school across the street in the new lot, but it's on the same property.
Q: Do you recall what caused the fire?
A: I don't know how it started, but it was quite a fire. It ruined the building.
Q: I don't suppose people thought of arson in those days.
A: I don't remember actually. It was something like the Fremont fire that burned upthe whole building. And I saw that too. Fremont School, the old school.
Q: What did your school day go like? What time did you go to school?
A: I think it was 8 o'clock in the morning to 3 in the afternoon. And at that time the girls had a separate schoolyard on one end of the building, and the boys on the other end, and we had to get in line to march in during recess and lunch and we had all kinds of routine things that they don't have any more.
A: Were boys and girls in class together?
Q: In class together, but we had to walk into the building in sort of a line like, separately.
A: In the morning, you played separately then too?
Q: Yes, the girls were at one end of the building, and the boys were in the play yard at the other end of the building. And it was separate except in the classes.
Q: What kind of breakfast did you eat?
A: Well, my mother was a very good cook and that was what she did before she was married, cooked for a family, living in a family. So she cooked the German way of all kinds of fancy foods and rich foods, and we ate real well. And everything was done from scratch, nothing out of cans or anything, it was all starting right from the scratch.
Q: Tell me about a typical breakfast.
A: Well, usually it was oatmeal or some kind of mush. Hot cereal and some milk, some fruit --
Q: Milk or cream?
A: I think it was always milk, I can't remember cream. And -- I don't remember all the things, but sometimes she had sweet things and snails and things that she made, and of course there was eggs sometimes, eggs and bacon were quite popular then.
Q: Where did you get your milk?

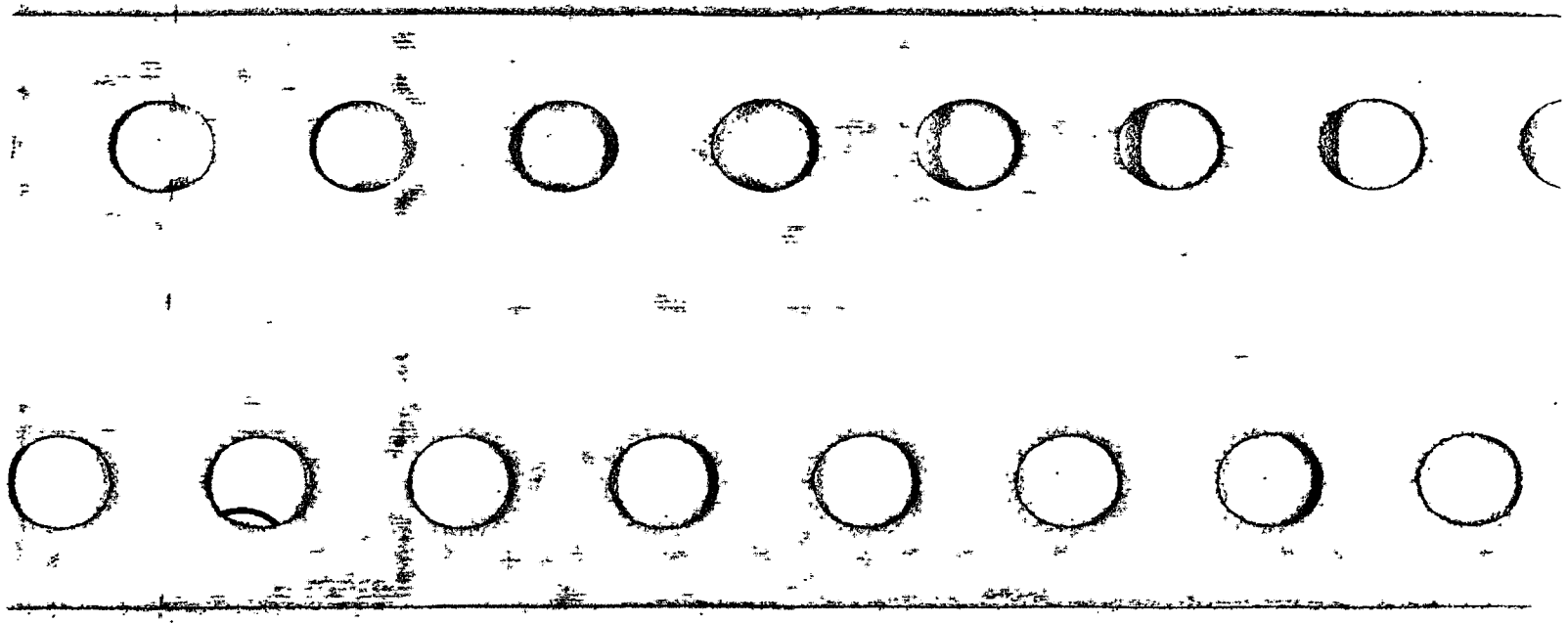
A: Well, believe it or not, at that time there were cows in the lots around Fruitvale, and I can remember when I was quite young, that they were still delivering the milk around to the homes right from the cows right there in Fruitvale. And somebody came to the door with a bucket of milk and a ladle, and my mother brought the pitcher out, and he filled it up. But that was stopped a little later on because they got more laws and things. And also there was some goat milk too at that time.
Q: So when that was stopped, what replaced it?
A: Well, then we'd get the milk from a milk delivery man who delivered it around in milk bottles.
Q: Do you have any idea of what the price was then for one of the pitchers full of milk?
A: I wasn't concerned about money at that time, but it was cheap. Probably ten cents a quart or something like that. Everything was cheap then.
Q: This was every day I presume?
A: I think so. I can't remember whether we got it every day, but I do know we had no refrigerator. And there was no refrigeration in the summer. My mother would put the milk in the washtub and cover it with wet cloths. In fact, anything she wanted to keep cold, she covered up with wet cloth in the washtub to keep it cool. I think she set it in a pan of water and then wet cloths over that. We didn't have any refrigeration at all.
Q: When did you get refrigerators?
A: We never had an ice box. When electric refrigerators came in, we had one then. We had a cellar under the house that was quite cool and she kept a lot of vegetables and eggs and things down in the cellar.
Q: What about eggs? Did people have chickens around here?
A: Yeah. Everybody in the block, or I'd say, most of the people on the block had chickens in the back yard, and sometimes rabbits and pigeons. And we had both in our back yard. And we always had chickens and eggs and rabbits for dinner and things like that.
Q: You didn't have a cow though?
A: No, we didn't. Our back yard wasn't big enough for that. But we did have berries and vegetables and everything growing in the back yard that we could possibly put in. And so did the neighbors.
Q: How much of the work did you have to do?
A: I had to take care of the chickens a lot of time. My mother used to make a mash for them in the morning, she'd make a mash, and my brothers and sisters helped.
Q: How many were there in your family?
A: Three.
Q: One brother and one sister?
A: Yes. We played a lot in the creek. Sausal Creek was down at the end of the street and that was our playground. There were big lots down there and we could go down there and build dams and tree houses and cave houses and fly kites and everything else. It was a real joy.
Q: It's still a pretty creek.
A: It is, but it's not the same. You can't build a dam in it any more. One time we had a dam in there that was a block long. I mean the water was a block long. We even tried paddling around in it. We had rafts and canoes and barrels and anything else that we could find. And there were a few fish in there at that time too but they were all little tiny things.

Q: So your mother stayed at home all the time?
A: She never worked until we got in business.
Q: It sounds as if she worked pretty hard cooking all those things.
A: In those days you did everything by hand. Gardening, and washing was done by hand, and packing -- she'd put up fruit in the winter time, and cooking and baking, everything was done by hand, and nothing was electric.
Q: What kind of fuel did you use for cooking?
A: Coal is the thing at that time, but wood too. But they always had a big pile of coal in the basement.
Q: Delivered by a coal truck?
A: There were coal and wood firms in Fruitvale at that time. One was up here on MacArthur, and one was on Fruitvale Avenue just below 12th Street. They handled chicken feed and animal feed and coal and wood and hay and grain. And of course everybody used them at that time.
Q: What about lunch? Did you take your lunch to school or did you come home for lunch?
A: We always took our lunch in a bag and it was usually sandwiches and cookies and maybe an apple. Except occasionally in the wintertime there was a school store where they served hot dogs and spaghetti and a few other things and usually they were a nickel a dish and we'd get that. We were given a dime to get something for lunch, and that was it.
Q: Nothing to drink?
A: There might have been soda water or something, I don't recall. Whether we had milk or something.
Q: And then you came home about 3 from school. And would you eat something then?
A: Oh, sometimes we'd grab an apple or whatever was around the house. But dinner was usually about 5:30 because my dad got home then.
Q: What time did he go to work, do you remember?
A: Well, when he was in San Francisco he had to go on the old SP train and it was about an hour and a half trip over there. Because the train went down to the mole on 7th street and then took the ferry across to San Francisco and then a streetcar on the other side. So they'd get up pretty early, around 6 o'clock I'd say. So he left the house sometimes around 6:30 or 7. Depending on where the job was.
Q: Was the train a long walk from your house?
A: Yes, he usually had to walk from where we lived down to below East 10th Street where the train was -- the tracks are still there. It's about a mile. And he'd walk home again at night. There was a little dinky street car on Fruitvale Avenue, but usually you missed it, and you walked then. If you got there in time, you'd take the streetcar and it was only about big enough to hold about 20 people.
Q: How did you get around?
A: Walking was the way to go everywhere, except that we always had either skates or a bicycle or coasters. We made our own coasters out of wheels and boards, and apple boxes. In fact we made everything, all our toys, kites, boats, everything we made ourselves. And we had no automobiles so it was a matter of taking a streetcar if you went any distance.
Q: When you were a youngster, how often did you go to San Francisco?
A: Not very often, We had some family friends over there, and at that time having a dinner at home was your recreation. We invited people to our house -- my mother always loved to make big dinners -- and we in

turn were invited to these friends' house.
Q: Would this be on a week night or on the weekend?
A: Usually it was on the weekend, Sunday or Saturday. And I can remember going to the old beach and Golden Gate Park and out there now it's all built up but there were sand dunes all beyond that, the ocean front there, and a few of the things in San Francisco. Other than that, I can't remember, except I can still remember a horse car in S.F. This driver had to get off -- it was at the Ferry Building, and he had to take the horse off of one end and lead it around to the other end, and go back the other way. That was the last horse car in San Francisco, I believe (chuckling).
Q: Can you tell me about a dinner. What would you eat in your family for dinner?
A: Oh, a family dinner usually included some vegetables, and always potatoes and meat.
A: How was it prepared? Fried, baked, stewed?
Q: Most of it was stewed or baked in the oven. Very little fried. And baked in the oven. We had a coal and wood stove, didn't have gas at that time.
Q: What kinds of vegetables?
A: Oh, just about everything, turnips, carrots, beets. spinach, Swiss chard, kale. My mother's favorite was kale. And of course anything else that was available. Onions, corn, almost everything in season. And the same with fruit. At that time we had very little canned goods so it was always whatever was in season.
Q: You mentioned home canning. Did your mother can vegetables as well as fruits?
A: Yeah. She bought, in the season she'd get two or three boxes of peaches and can them all and put them down in the basement, and in apricot season she's get some apricots, and other things.
Q: And vegetables too?
A: No, she didn't usually can vegetables because there was danger in canning them. They emphasized it at that time. The vegetables were nearly all fresh or dried, like beans, and things like that.
Q: Did she try to keep the root vegetables in the cellar?
A: They kept a lot of things like potatoes and things in the cellar for a long time, I can remember, but I don't know just how long. Also in the laying season, the chickens would lay more eggs than they needed, so she put them up in water glass, [silica gel] and they always had a crock or two of eggs down there. And sometimes my dad had a barrel of beer, too, or rather, a crock of beer, that he made, but that was only a couple of times.
Q: Tell me about one of your company dinners. How was this different from your everyday dinner?
A: Oh, my mother'd start about three days ahead and bake two or three pies, and some cookies and make some apple sauce and other things and then she'd get whatever she needed, all the seasonings and everything, and by the time we got to the dinner there was twice as much or three times as much as we could possibly eat and about 15 things to choose from and there it was, so we ate leftovers for the next four or five days.
Q: Did the children eat with the adults?
A: If there was room. Sometimes there wasn't room at the main table, the big table, so they would put a few of us in the kitchen on the kitchen table. You know like there'd be maybe anywhere from 8 to 16,

17, 18 people there, at a time. And after that they'd clear up the stuff and we'd have to wash the dishes, and they'd play pinochle. That was the game. So that was the way they lived in those days.
Q: Did they drink?
A: Not very much.
Usually they'd drink a little beer and maybe a glass of wine. But I can't remember they ever had hard liquor.
Q: Did you make your own wine?
A: No, they didn't.
Q: But your father made his own beer?
A: Well, just a couple of times he did, I can remember. And they also made root beer for us kids. A couple of times.
Q: Did they make German foods?
A: A lot of it was that, but once she was in New York, she worked in houses, and she had to cook what they wanted, so it wasn't particularly German food, but she did have some German foods I've never tasted anywehre else since then except once or twice at the old Shadow in San FRancisco, which was a German restaurant, and they had some of those sauerbratens and kartoffels and things that I'd never heard of at any other restaurant anywhere.
Q; I think of German Christmas food as being special.
A; Oh, Christmas was a big time! We were supposed to believe in Santa Claus, but we always knew that somehow or other my dad disappeared and went around the house and came in a different door. But they had a big Christmas, and mostly homemade things though, food, and we only got one toy at a time. We didn't get a whole bunch of toys, each got one toy. But it was a big occasion for a lot of food, and friends coming in, and the Christmas tree was decorated with homemade popcorn and all kinds of homemade decorations, and also they had candles on the Christmas tree before they had electric lights, at first. So we had to be careful that we didn't burn the house down.
Q: When did you get electricity?
A: Well, I think we had electricity in the house as far as I can remember. Some of the people only had gas lights, I remember they had to light the lights by gas. But we had electricity in our house all the time but they didn't have Christmas tree lights, and they didn't have any electrical appliances. I think the first one was an electric toaster, just a little table toaster.
Q: You mentioned the orchards. Do you know anything about the Bing cherry being developed here in Fruitvale?
A: I hadn't heard that, but San Leandro was called the Cherry City at that time. And I can remember going out there and picking cherries and apricots and peaches, but I can't remember anything about the Bing cherry being developed here.
Q: The fruits here in Fruitvale were --
A: At that time, Fruitvale Avenue was lined with a lot of mansions of wealthy people who had probably built them about 20 years or so before, big mansions all along Fruitvale Av. The street itself didn't even have gutters, it was a gravel street. But there were a lot of orchards around the property of those mansions, which were usually cherries and apples and plums and apricots I remember. And a lot of the orchards were still partly there. They were neglected, but you could see that they had been orchards, they were big empty lots.
Q: Did you get the fruit?
A: Well, yes, we were always jumping over fences and picking a few





plums or something but it was usually in some empty lot, and almost everybody had a fruit tree somewhere around the house. We had a walnut tree and a cherry tree I think in our yard, and the neighbors had an apple tree.
Q: It must have been beautiful in the spring, when they flowered.
A: You grow up in a situation like that, and it becomes your life, you know, you're just living right there.
Q: And you don't think about it.
A: Yeah.
Q: Did people come at that time for vacations?
A; I can remember they had big holidays at the Altenheim. And they had a May Day fest every year and hundreds of people would be there and celebrating. They came from all over the Bay Area for that, it was mostly German people. Other than that, I can remember Tepper's Gardens, on MacArthur Boulevard and Dimond Avenue, and the building is still there, and I can remember going there and they would have raffles and a dance and a picnic.
Q: How old were you when you first began to go there?
A: Well, always the whole family went. It was called a beer garden but it was more of a family affair. I don't remember how old I was but I can probably guess it was 8 to 10 years old, somewhere in there. The building is still there.
Q: What about Oktoberfest?
A: No, I didn't hear of that until later on. But they did have a May Day Fest, that was one, and of course there was an endless number of picnics. There was the German picnic, an Italian picnic, and the butchers' picnic, and the grocers' picnic. We went to a lot of those as well as the dances. The unions, like the carpenters' union had a picnic and a dance. And going to picnics was a general thing then.
Q: Who were your neighbors?
A: Well, there were neighbors of all kinds, there were some Italian famailies, and some -- I don't know the nationality -- I guess there was just a combination of everything. I really didn't know.
Q: Did you socialize with your neighbors?
A: Oh, sure, everybody went in everybody's house. Except one or two neighbors that were what we called nuisances, they didn't like him and he didn't like us. But as kids we went into all the houses of people that had children, and they came into our house, into their back yard, and in the evenings, why, there was no television, so everybody sat out on the front porch and we'd gather around the front porch and either sing or play games or -- they had hammocks on the front porch then, and everybody was sitting in the hammock. That's about the neighborhood life. I'd say on our block there was anywhere from 12 to 20 kids that lived there, plus some more coming from the other neighborhoods.

[Side B]

Q: What was your first job, and when did you get it?
A: Well, in those days you started working as soon as you could do anything, we had to do chores around the house, just bring up the firewood or sweep out the kitchen or something like that, wash the dishes, as early as I could remember we always had something to do. But outside of our own house, the first thing I can remember is cutting the neighbors' lawn for ten cents. And the neighbors would sometimes

have some other job like pulling weeds and we'd make a penny or something like that, for doing a little work in the neighborhood. But as soon as I got to be 12 years old I started with a paper route. I carried the Tribune for 4 and a half years and I learned a lot from that.

Q: In what way?

A: Well, you learned you had to do the job every day, there's no goofing off, you don't say, well I don't want to deliver the papers today. You had to do it, and if it was raining, you still went out and did it. And on Sunday morning, we had to get up at five o'clock and get the papers out early, and the afternoon was after school of course. [The Tribune was an evening paper, except on Sunday.]

Q: Did you have any trouble collecting?

A: Not really. At that time the people were very easy to collect from, they were very nice. However, it was a little later that they had collectors going around and collecting. And I can remember we made $6 a month on the route. It seemed as though they had a man going around doing the collecting. So I lasted most of the time until I was in the middle of high school and then I got a job delivering the shopping news, which was an advertising paper. It came around once a week, I believe, as I remember.

Q: Did you do that in addition to the Tribune?

A: At first, and then I gave up the paper route because I was getting into other work, jobs here and there, and I didn't go to college so as soon as I got out of school I was getting a job right away quick.

Q: What did you do?

A: Well the first job was down at the cannery, stacking cans, and that only lasted just during a certain season, the production season.

Q: What cannery was it?

A: American Can Co., right down there on Fruitvale.

Q: So it was just temporary because they would make a lot of cans just before packing the fruit, and that was very interesting but it didn't last very long. Then I got a job as a baker's helper in the old Mutual Creamery Bakery, which was a forerunner of the Safeway Stores. It developed later on, bought out by Safeway. So that was that.

Q: How did you get the Food Mill?

A: Well, after I was in the bakery about 6 months or so I got a job as an office boy or delivery boy for Remington Typewriter Company, and I worked there several years and learned a lot about business, delivering and office work. And then --

Q: Where was this, in Oakland?

A: Downtown Oakland, yes. Just a sales office.

Q: How did you get to work?

A: At that time, I had a car, but I also had a bicycle and sometimes I went down on the bike. But I had an old car, a $20 car at that time, and fixed it up, and like all kids do, they work on the car on Saturday, and ride the rest of the week.

Q: And you were still living at home with your parents?

A: Yeah, still living at home. And how I got into this business was quite a situation. There was a depression, it was in 1929, the '32 depression, and everybody was out of work and business was bad, and they wanted to transfer me to San Francisco, and I told them, well, I thought I'd quit, because I had some other ideas. So I quit, and one of the salesmen said, what are you going to do now? And I said, well, I don't know, I think I'll just go out and try and sell something. I

had no job, and nobody could get a job then. And he said well, there's an old flour mill down in West Oakland that's hiring house-to-house sales people, selling flour and cereals. Why don't you go down there and see what you can do? So I went down and of course I got a job because you could get a job selling something on commission anywhere, and I started doing that. It was called the Burstone Flour Mill, it as just a little small --. Funny thing, I went down and asked for Mr. Burstone, and they said, Oh, there is no Mr. Burstone. (laughs) Anyway, the fellows that were running that, there was two or three of them and they disagreed and they broke up and so that ended that, but one of the fellows, Mr. Humphrey, started another little mill here on 38th Avenue in Fruitvale so I went along with him, and he was quite old, and so I got started selling house to house.
Q: He bought whole grain and ground it there into flour, and then you took the flour out to sell it
A; Yeah. Flour and grain, cereals, and things.
Q; In what kind of packages was it?
A: Paper bag. With a little label on it.
Q: Five pounds? Ten pounds?
A: Oh, we could sell any amount the customer wanted, but it was usually 2 pounds for a quarter, that we were selling, and if you got one or two bags sold, you could get a big deal. Because I can remember you only made maybe $5 a week. It was not easy because everybody was out of work and watching their money.
Q: All wheat?
A: No, there was corn meal, and rye flour, and barley, and several other things. We also sold a little bit of dried fruit or honey too at that time. It was on 38th Avenue, and this Mr. Humphrey was going to quit because he was getting old and wanted to move back East. And in the meantime, my dad was out of work, so we decided we'd go into business ourselves, and we started right up here, a block down the street, and a little later, Mr. Humphrey sold.
Q: What kind of business?
A: The same thing, grinding flour and cereal, and we had some beans and dried fruit and honey.
Q: You had to buy mill equipment then?
A: Well, our first mill was actually a rebuilt coffee grinder, which we rebuilt so it would grind fine flour. We used that for a few months. It was an electric motor. We've still got it, it's over there next door, but we haven't used it for years. And after four or five months, we bought an old stone mill. That was in 1933, we bought the stone mill, and my dad did the milling and I took care of the store and that was all it was.
Q: And Mr. Humphrey?
A; Oh, he sold out, and also one of the other fellows that had gone into the business, both of them sold out. One was Mr. Sawyer, who was a real estate man, and he was up here on 38th for a while. He sold out his business to me, which didn't amount to anything because all he had was a list of a few customers' names. Mr. Humphrey sold out to me too. We still have that old mill that Mr. Humphrey had, the pieces of it. It's not usable any more, but we still have parts of it next door. So that left us with no competition anywhere in the East Bay, and from then on, we just kept growing and growing.

Q: Did your brother go in with you too?
A; No, my brother was electrical minded, and he worked in various electrical jobs and finally he opened an electrical store in Berkeley.
Q: So it was just you and your father?
A: My dad and I, yes.
Q; Did your mother get involved at all?
A; After we got going a little while, my mother came in and helped occasionally, and my sister came in and helped part time. That was it for the first few years.
Q: When did you marry?
A: I didn't marry until about 5 years ago. I was single all that time. Practically married to the business. I was working about 12 hours a day and seven days a week. Except Sunday maybe only 8 hours. And I'm still doing it too.
Q: Tell me about your customers. You've seen food fads come and go through the years. But you didn't go into the business primarily because of your interest in food; it was a business affair?
A: Not really, I just got into it by luck you might say, by this man saying, why don't you go down there and try and find a job. It was just luck. I was not too healthy at that time. I'd eaten so much poor food you know, and I was kind of sick a lot, nothing serious, but I just wasn't feeling good.
Q: What do you mean by poor food?
A: Well, all this rich food of pies and cakes and candy and everything else.
Q: . What a lot of people consider good food.
A: Well, for me it was bad, because I was not feeling too well. And so I had read a couple of books on health and some of them mentioned diets and so forth so I was kind of interested in diets and eating and so forth, even when I went into this. I had stopped eating a lot of things that I thought were no good for me and I started feeling better.
Q: Did your mother have any feelings about this?
A: Well, sometimes she'd wonder why I didn't eat everything that she put on the table. She went along with it, she was very good.
Q; Your parents were healthy ?
A: Oh yes, they both lived to over 90. But they in turn ate very sparingly. You know, they didn't eat like I did, all the sweet stuff.
Q: Your mother baked it but she didn't eat it?
A: Well, they ate some of it, but the kids were the ones that ate it, and we'd sometimes eat way too much of it and that was our downfall I think. Candy all the time and gooey stuff that we shouldn't have eaten, which I don't eat any more.
Q: So your first customers were what kind of people?
A: They were usually somebody that had a health problem, they'd been ill or not feeling well and were interested in certain whole grains and things. And there also were lecturers going around at that time lecturing on health , health lecturers, and so --.
Q: What were some of the trends at that time? Dr. Graham was much earlier of course, and the Kelloggs.
A: Well, there was Bernarr McFadden, with his health magazine, and that was a big influence, and the health lecturers, Gaylord

Hauser was a young man then, he's 85 now. And there was Paul Bragg who died recently at over 90, and there was St.Louis Estes, and Pretorius was another one, and Dr. Jackson from Canada. There were several others, but I don't remember them all. And they would hold these lectures, and usually they would stress eating natural foods, and simple foods, and they always had a book or something to sell, so they made their money on what they were selling. They in turn converted a lot of people to look for those foods and that's where the health store started. And Oakland Health Store down on Telegraph Av. is still there, and that was the first one that was in Oakland. They're still there, there were four brothers.

Q: Did you consider your store a health store?

A: Not really, we were more of a mill store, a grain store. There were hardly any health foods available in packages or cans. There was just a few, Battle Creek Foods and Loma Linda foods. So we had to have just those things. But the customers coming in were usually older people who had had some health problems and weren't feeling well and they decided to eat more simple food. And also there were a few younger people but mostly they came in for things like nuts or dried fruit or something like that.

Q: What about honey? Where did you get it from? Were there local beekeepers?

A: Well, yes. There were beekeepers, I soon got acquainted with some beekeepers, and we still get our honey from beekeepers, only they're not the same ones any more. And the beekeepers would -- of course, we got some honey from honey packers too, not all of it from beekeepers. But they'd bring in the cans of honey and we'd buy them and strain it, and bottle it and sell it. And that's what we're still doing.

Q: Were there people who had a religious connection with their food?

A: Not at that time, that I can remember. The Adventist church advocated diet reforms, but that was later on. Loma Linda -- wel, that was one, and also the Kellogg family that had the Battle Creek Sanitarium. The Kellog that has the cornflakes today, was one of the brothers. And Harvey Kellogg was the doctor who started the Battle Creek Sanitarium and the Battle Creek foods.

Q: So your clientele at that time was primarily older people?

A: Mostly, and we were all known as "health nuts." That was the name of it.

Q: Was there opposition?

A: Well, most people considered it funny. If you said, well, you went to a health store, everybody laughed a little bit. Oh, those health nuts, or something. For the first few years. But it changed after that. People would -- I'd hear them go by and look in the window and say, Oh, some of those health nuts. But most of the ones that came in were not, you know, they were just good customers. And mostly they were the people at first that I'd sold to by going around house to house. See, I'd sold them some breakfast cereal and their family liked it, so they came in the store and bought it.

Q: Was there a business organization of any kind?

A: There was a grocers' association and a butchers' association.

There was nothing in the health line for about the first 8 or 10 years anyway. There's several now. There's Norcal which is an association of all the health stores in Northern California, and Socal in Southern California, and then 5 or 6 others scattered around the country.
Q: Are you a member?
A: Oh, yes. Now there's a national one which takes in all of the regional ones.
Q: Did you have anything to do with this development?
A: Well, largely by attending, and I was on the board for a while of one of them.
Q: You must have been one of the first in this area.
A: Well, I was, because the association didn't start until about 10 years after we started.
Q: Did you have anything to do with starting it?
A: Not really, bedcause I was so buried under work that I didn't have time but I knew all the people because everybody knew everybody then, in the industry because there were only about 20 or 25 health stores in all of Northern California at that time.
Q: How did you get in touch with your suppliers or your market?
A: Well, there weren't very many suppliers either.
Q: Did you develop your own?
A: We didn't, but they developed as the business developed. There was the Landstrom Company over there was just one man going around in his car, delivering to the few health stores. There were a few others, like I say, Loma Linda and Battle Creek would have someone that would come around occasionally and take an order.
Q: Did you ever have to do anything to develop your market or did it just grow as fast as you could keep up with it?
A: Well, it grew, but of course you develop by doing things right and treating customers right. At that time I delivered all over the East Bay, and people would sometimes call up at 5 o'clock in the afternoon and say, bring me something tonight, I'd take it out and bring it to them. And things like that. And you've got a lot of people coming to you for just giving them good service.
Q: Did you deliver to any bakeries or just to private customers?
A: Not really. There was a few little places that would maybe get a few pounds. Now we do, we don't deliver much any more, we did then, but most of that came later on.
Q: When did that change?
A: Well, as people became interested in foods, then other stores started up, and a few little bakeries started making things with stone ground flour and various other things. It's not big now because they can get those supplies from the big suppliers now.
Q: What is the big segment of your business now?
A: Well, the retail business right here in the store. The thing we sell the most of is of course the bread and bakery products.
Q: When did you develop the bakery?
A: Well, in the building where we started, which was down there, there was a baker in the back of the building who went out on a bakery route, and delivered bread to homes. And he baked some bread for us. We'd grind the flour and he baked the bread and

we'd sell it in our store there. But that lasted just about 5 years or so and then he sold out and went to a farm somewhere. So then there was a neighborhood baker across the street, and he was not doing too well -- he was baking everyething -- and we started taking flour over to him, and he would bake some bread for us and come over and we would sell it. Then his business got worse and worse, so he finally said, well why don't I just come over and work for you? And he did. He came over and we fixed up a little small oven in a corner of the store, and he started baking bread and cookies and things for us, and closed his bakery over there. He was with us for a good many years, probably 15 or 20 years. Still lives down the street here, about a block and a half down. Julius Egenburger. He retired about 6 or 7 years ago.

Q; When did you move to this location?

A: In 1939, we could see we needed more room, and so we started by buying one lot here, and then we built a building that was just one part of this store, and then as the years went on, we built more and more all the way around, and we've added to the building 8 different times. From the original store. And we bought the property on both sides too. We didn't own the property before.

Q: So you started with the mill, and then expanded to the retail store and the bakery. And now the bakery is the tail that wags the dog?

A: No, it's just one part of it, the thing that we sell the most of, but we sell just about everything, there's several thousand items now.

Q: When did you start getting into the vitamins and things?

A: When we started, I never heard of a vitamin. They hadn't even been discovered, but just shortly after, we heard of Vitamin A being discovered, and it was oh, 5 or 6 years after we started that they started putting them on the market, and we started getting you know, just a few bottles of them.

Q: Did the war make any difference in your business?

A: There was rationing of some things and I can remember people coming in in big long lines to get oil, with rationing coupons, and a few other things that were in short supply. If something was short, there'd be a big crowd of people on the day that we'd get it in.

Q: Honey was not rationed, was it? Sugar was, but not honey?

A: I can't remember it being rationed. But it might have been that we weren't able to get enough of it, I can't remember that, but it wasn't rationed. But some things were, and the things that were, when we'd get a small supply in, then everybody would come that day and there'd be a big crowd to get the little we had.

Q: Did you get black customers in significant numbers?

A: Now we do, yes.

Q: Is this rather recent?

A: Well, there have always been some black people in Fruitvale; I can remember some in school. And there've been some in the neighborhood, and we get along fine. But it's been about the last 10 years I guess when there has beena noticeable big increase, in customers and in the neighborhood both. We have

black people down in the neighborhood where I live, some of the houses are owned by black people, and the neighbors get along fine.
Q: Your client population is pretty representative of the neighborhood population?
A: It's hard to tell, but I would say that 25% of my customers now are black.
Q: What about Asians?
A: Yes, in fact we get customers of all kinds. We get a lot of Indians from India, because they want some of the flours that we have. And quite a few Asians, and now we're getting quite a few of the Spanish speaking people coming in. In fact, it's hard to know nowdays because we have all kinds of different nationalities coming. Some people that seem to have a Scandinavian accent, and just about everybody. English, too. Somebody that speaks the King's English.
Q: Has your client population gotten any younger? Apart from the fact that as we get older, everybody looks younger?
Q: You mean the customers?
Q: Yes.
A: When the hippy craze was going big out in Berkeley, that was about 8 or 9 years or so ago, we were getting them in here by the truckload. They were coming in in a Volkswagen bus or something, and 8 or 10 of them would pile in, and there were times when there'd be 50 of them in the store at a time. And at that time we had a bunch of extra clerks too to try to take care of it. They were mostly young people at that time, and that's when the young people seem to have taken to the idea, and they've stayed with it, mostly. There's been a lot of young people now. They've become accustomed to the idea of eating natural foods and doing their own baking and cooking, almost like they did when my mother was doing it. They get things and do it themselves. So that changed the whole picture. And now I'd say there's just a mix of everything from one-day old babies up to 95. We've got one customer 98 years old who comes in, and walks in yet. She's an old lady but she's still on her feet and she still knows what she's doing. (chuckles).
Q: What about the Black Muslims?
A: Do you mean from the Arabian countries?
Q: There's a Black Muslim Bakery in East Oakland.
A: Oh yes, we've been in touch with them, and we used to sell some of their products. We're selling things now made by a black bakery, a fellow brings in these little pies. And I helped him get established. He was starting a place and I gave him one of my old ovens so he could get started, over on the other side of town. It's a little round thing called a bean tart, and they sell real well, and he's doing real well. I'm helping him as much as I can. And there's others too that come in with products they're selling and making. We try to help everybody who comes along, if it's something that's in our line.
Q: Where do you draw the line?
A: Well, we draw the line at something we feel is detrimental to somebody's health, in the sense that it's probably better to sell it in another store. We don't sell any tobacco of any kind, or a lot of things that have chemicals in them that we feel it's best

to stay away from. We don't have coffee either. But it's hard now to find out which is which because so many items are just on the border line. So we try to have just the items we feel are things that we would eat ourselves, I mean that we wouldn't hesitate to eat. Some things are for special diets too. Like a person may be a diabetic, and they would use a diabetic food occasionally. Which I don't consider good food, but they want it for certain situations.

Q: You mean the ones with synthetics?

A: The diabetic foods, if they're substitutes for something sweet, they generally have an artificial sweetener, which we don't sell very much of any more because most people realize they're not very good, but sometimes they want to have something for a special birthday party or something like that, and they'll buy a little thing for a certain person.

Q: Who are your employees?

A: Well, most of them have been here quite a long time, 10, 15 years or so. And the bakers of course, if you get a baker, they generally stay with you for years. One baker was here for 15, 20 years and the ones we have now have been for several years. We have two, and a couple of the other boys can help out a little too, and I help them occasionally. So the other employees, one is my niece, and her son, and some of them were friends of theirs years ago. Like one girl was the daughter of a woman that worked here quite a long time ago, and she's been here for about 15 years or so. And some of them have been just people who come along at the right time to ask for work and they seem to have the ability and seem to fit into the business and we hired them and they stayed here ever since. [end of tape].

Dennis

Field Tape --
[Mr. Dennis said that he has now become unionized and is competing with the chain stores. I asked him if he was competing with the Chinese man who has a cheese store across the street, and he said, "Oh yes, he came here because of us." The Food Mill doesn't have room to handle a lot of cheeses, so this young man opened a cheese store and sells several things which the Food Mill does not have, including coffees and teas, so that people can go across there and get things that they can't get from him. He also helped another Chinese business, which is down in the triangle by the Altenheim, a new grocery store which he says buys some supplies from him, and they're doing very well. And then just down the block from him, he has a "competitor," a man who sells some of the same things he sells, but also in addition sells equipment which has to be demonstrated, which Mr. Dennis is unable to do in his shop. This man sells blenders and liquifiers and that sort of thing, all related to the health food business. Mr. Dennis of course has seen many many changes in Fruitvale, and he says they themselves have had very little trouble with burglary or vandalism, because for one thing they have bakers there working all night, so there's almost always someone in the store. Mr. Dennis is there working all day Sunday when no one else is, and then also he says that their business just doesn't attract that kind of people. A few years ago they had a hard time. During the Vietnamese war, they had a few people who had bad checks, and there was crime in the neighborhood, but recently, now, they almost never have a bad check, and almost no shoplifting. Their customers are all really nice people. Things are a lot better now than 10 years ago.

I asked him about games played in his childhood. He'd seen so many changes, MacArthur Boulevard has been widened, and of course the games now are so different. As a boy, the games that he played out in the street -- one was called "One Foot off the gutter," Kick the Can; Run, Sheep, Run; and then all sorts of marble games and top games; mumbletypeg; cops and robbers; and something involving Indians. The men played pinochle and the women played whist, and occasionally they played a little poker.

He has danced all of his life. His folks went to a lot of lodge dances, union dances, German dances. They went to dances all his life in the German Hall, at Park Blvd and MacArthur. There were a number of German lodges: the Herman Sons, and the Herman Sisters, which still meet at the Bjornsons Sons of Norway Hall on MacArthur Blvd. There were a lot of clubs, a gymnastic club, a singing club. He enjoyed most the Reveleers Club. Picnics were the big thing always for entertainment. He still dances every Sunday evening at the German Hall. He met his wife there, at the German Hall, now I think Bjornsons Hall on MacArthur Boulevard.]

Mr. Dennis is a rare person -- certainly a workaholic and an enthusiast, but showing none of the traits of a zealot. His diction was interesting -- note some of the words and phrases which are seldom heard any more: and so forth, right away quick, dinky, that was that, didn't amount to anything.